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SUBJECT: A DIALOGUE ON ETHIOPIA'S DEMOCRATIZATION: DRL A/S
KRAMER MEETS PRIME MINISTER MELES

Classified By: Ambassador Donald Yamamoto for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) In a broad-ranging 90-minute conversation, DRL Assistant Secretary David Kramer effectively noted senior Washington concerns about recent developments in Ethiopia's progress toward democratization with Prime Minister Meles Zenawi on July 23. In response, the Prime Minister conveyed the most comprehensive, succinct explanation of the Ethiopian Government's (GoE) view of its own democratic track record since the contentious 2005 national elections. While commending the strong bilateral strategic partnership, A/S Kramer's approach of "coming to hear the Ethiopian perspective" set the stage for a candid non-adversarial discussion while noting that the United States is watching Ethiopian developments closely and concerned with recent trends. Arguing that "democracy is necessary for Ethiopia's continued existence," the Prime Minister painted a picture of a committed government in a rough neighborhood struggling to build democratic institutions in the face of affronts by a political opposition bent on undermining the constitution to seize power. From his side, Meles also expressed concern about the "dysfunctional dialogue" with the U.S. and international community that suggests a lack of international confidence in Ethiopia's trajectory if left unattended by international minding. In light of the clear unrelenting GoE commitment to its current approach to domestic politics as conveyed by the Prime Minister, it is now more critical than ever to accept the Prime Minister's suggestion of an on-going senior bilateral dialogue on democracy and human rights issues if the USG is going to avert potentially destabilizing internal developments in Ethiopia as we approach the critical 2010 elections. Septels will report on the Prime Minister and other interlocutors' perceptions of the draft civil society organizations (CSO) law and the press law. End Summary.

NOTING WASHINGTON'S CONCERNS

12. (C) In the first intensive bilateral discussion focused solely on Ethiopia's democratic process by a senior Washington principal in over a year, DRL Assistant Secretary Kramer highlighted the United States concern with the broadly perceived backsliding by the GoE on democracy and human rights since 2005. Kramer emphasized that in contrast to the GoE's clear and steady positive progression of democratic reform between 1991 and 2005, Ethiopia watchers in Washington, both within and outside of the USG, are concerned with the democratic trends that the GoE has taken since 2005,

which most perceive as in stark contrast to the earlier progress. Kramer argued that regardless of the results of the coming U.S. election, the USG's close attention to democracy and human rights issues in Ethiopia will certainly continue into the next Administration. Specifically, A/S Kramer noted the widely-held perception of a narrowing of Ethiopia's political space since 2005, particularly as punctuated by a draft CSO law that restricts foreign-funded CSOs from engaging in democracy and human rights related issues, local elections in April in which all but three of the 3.6 million contested seats went to the ruling and affiliated parties, a quickly passed Press Law, and widespread reports of rights abuses.

DEMOCRACY IS FUNDAMENTAL TO NATIONAL SURVIVAL...

13. (C) Prime Minister Meles acknowledged that peace and security is not, and should not be, the totality of U.S.-Ethiopia bilateral relations and expressed his hope that A/S Kramer's visit would be the start of an on-going bilateral discussion on democracy and human rights issues. Meles argued that the GoE is convinced of the values Ethiopia shares with the U.S., but noted that Ethiopia will develop those values in its own way. Meles emphasized that the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) holds democracy as a core belief because democratizing Ethiopia is not a matter of choice, but is an existential issue fundamental to national survival. Meles pointed to the Ethiopian constitution as the prime example of the GoE's commitment to democracy, arguing that the GoE has

ADDIS ABAB 00002078 002 OF 004

had to struggle to uphold the constitution against opponents seeking to undermine it. Meles also highlighted the lack of a precedent in Ethiopia for the public to acknowledge or accept a constitution. To mitigate against these challenges of history and anti-democratic sectors of society, the EPRDF has focused on democratizing society by developing a national consensus to bring Ethiopians to see the virtue of a constitutional order "even if it means preparing for a civil war, through a peaceful process, to convince the public." At the same time, the EPRDF is "providing adequate political space to those who pursue their efforts through constitutional means." In addition to developing a national consensus about democracy, Meles argued that the GoE is focused on building lasting democratic institutions such as the police, army, and judiciary.

...BUT THE OPPOSITION IS UNDERMINING THE CONSTITUTION

14. (C) Despite the GoE providing adequate political space, Meles argued, many 2005-era opposition leaders were former Derg officials opposed to the constitution and seeking to change the constitution through extra-constitutional means. While the EPRDF has had successes and challenges since coming to power, Meles accused the opposition of fueling popular resentment of the ruling party for its failings and prompting the public to take to the streets. By capitalizing on these resentments, formerly-Derg opposition leaders sought to spur street protest momentum to dismantle the constitutional system. When the opposition rejected constitutional means of election result redress, the GoE established an alternative election complaints review process. That process, Meles claimed, reached outcomes inconsistent with the opposition's claims.

15. (C) After the 2005 elections, Meles argued that the ruling and opposition parties tried to establish a process of inter-party dialogue to address issues raised by the opposition -- parliamentary procedure, the media, the National Electoral Board (NEB), etc. -- through peaceful, legal means. When the opposition rejected this effort in favor of civil disobedience, the EPRDF drew the line. Because the opposition's civil disobedience resulted in

scores of deaths, the GoE took the opposition leaders to court. Only when they expressed regret for their actions and pledged to uphold the constitution did the GoE grant them pardons. Despite the opposition abandoning the process of dialogue, Meles argued, the EPRDF still pursued the issues they raised to make national institutions stronger. As a result, Meles acclaimed Ethiopia's parliamentary procedures as among the best in the world granting the opposition more than adequate space in Parliament, including positions influencing the parliamentary agenda. The GoE similarly reviewed best practices from around the world to revise the National Electoral Board, electoral law, and Media Law. "Some opposition accepted provisions, while others rejected them," Meles claimed. (Note: After the EPRDF rejected virtually every major best practice recommended by the main opposition parties, the UEDF, OFDM, and then CUD under Temesgen Zewdie walked out of the interparty dialogue process. The EPRDF passed the electoral law with support from UEDP-Medhin and Ayele Chamisso in June 2007 claiming to have the backing of the opposition. End Note).

THE EPRDF: OF, FOR, AND BY THE PEOPLE

16. (C) Meles highlighted this engagement with the opposition parties and consideration of international best practices as evidence that Ethiopia's political space is actually wider than ever, not narrowed since 2005. In addition to building strong institutions, Meles argued that the EPRDF has redoubled efforts to reach out to the grassroots while opposition parties have fractured from infighting and the popular recognition that their protest votes were misplaced. Additionally, responsible opposition parties have recognized that they must play by the rules and have therefore split from the extremist opposition groups. As a result, the "2005 protest vote is gone and is unlikely to return." Meles claimed that the GoE wants a vibrant opposition because fighting in parliament is better than fighting in the mountains. While the EPRDF wants opposition engagement and dialogue, "because the EPRDF occupies the middle ground in

ADDIS ABAB 00002078 003 OF 004

Ethiopia, there is only a narrow agenda left for the opposition to claim."

EXPLAINING THE LOCAL ELECTIONS

17. (C) A/S Kramer drew specific attention to the April 2008 local election results, in which opposition candidates won only three of 3.6 million contested seats, as another example that shapes perceptions about Ethiopia's democracy. Meles explained that despite having adequate space to compete, the opposition did not compete well. He further argued that the democratic process should be defined by the quality of the process, not the results. Meles offered that the 3.6 million to three outcome is not a surprise when three particular dynamics are considered. First, while 85% of the seats were rural and the elections required 300 candidates for each of the 15,000 rural "kebele" councils, opposition parties were unable to field adequate candidates as no opposition party has more than a few thousand members. The Prime Minister suggested that this dynamic accounted for roughly 50% of the local election results. Second, since 2005 the EPRDF has struggled to correct the rural public's misconceptions of the EPRDF's efforts. By resolidifying this rural, core constituency, Meles suggested, the EPRDF secured an additional roughly 30% of the results. Finally, Meles feigned surprise that the EPRDF secured the urban vote, arguing that it was only in the past year, after securing its core rural constituency, that the EPRDF began addressing the urban misconceptions of the EPRDF's record. The Prime Minister explained the EPRDF's urban win as stemming from 1) an urban realization that as long as the EPRDF wins the rural vote, they will stay, so an opposition vote is useless, 2) the growing economy has shown that "we are not country

bumpkins" earning the EPRDF further goodwill, and 3) the urban dwellers saw the unconstitutional opposition's true intent when they didn't take control over the Addis Ababa municipality after the 2005 elections. Meles concluded that the 2008 local election process "was clean" but half confided that he himself questions whether the urban outcome is sustainable into another election.

THE GOE TOO IS CONCERNED

18. (C) Near the end of the discussion, the Prime Minister shifted the dialogue noting that he too is concerned about "dysfunctional" aspects of the bilateral dialogue. Meles specific raised concerns of misinformation about the country in the international community. "Ethiopia is more than aware about international processes than it is given credit for," Meles argued. "I know how the human rights game is played," he stated arguing that often a large volume of allegations about concerning developments "trumps" confirmation of those allegations. Meles emphasized that he hopes USG statements about human rights are based on facts and that the USG gets the facts right and verifies them. Meles further lamented that the USG often raises human rights concerns in the annual human rights report without ever raising them directly with the GoE before publication or subsequently.

19. (C) Meles further noted the GoE sentiment that the international community has no confidence in Ethiopia's democratic trajectory unless the international community is constantly minding it. This starting assumption of a narrowing of democratic space and of human rights abuses "poisons the well." Instead, it would be proper for Ethiopia to be granted the benefit of the doubt, which Meles argued, would remove a large portion of the dysfunctionality from the bilateral dialogue. Kramer pushed back, noting that both the Embassy and the Department work strenuously to verify any concerns in our reporting. He also noted that perceptions of the situation in Ethiopia have a way of taking a certain reality, a point Meles acknowledged and agreed was a challenge his government needed to face. Kramer welcomed the opportunity to make the dialogue on these issues as effective and candid as possible.

COMMENT

110. (C) Although a highly stylized version of recent events that runs in stark contrast with the prevailing analysis in

ADDIS ABAB 00002078 004 OF 004

Addis Ababa's diplomatic community, Prime Minister Meles's comments offered an intensive and expansive insight into the GoE and EPRDF's perception of political developments since 2005. His narrative unveils an unrelenting commitment at the senior levels of the GoE to Ethiopia's current democratic trajectory devoid of any suggestion of a reversal or alteration of course. Post, and the broader Addis Ababa diplomatic community, is growing increasingly convinced that the unmitigated pursuit of the GoE and EPRDF's existing democratic trajectory and tactics will risk thrusting the country into political violence as national elections approach in 2010. As such, it is now more critical than ever to accept the Prime Minister's suggestion of an on-going senior bilateral dialogue on democracy and human rights issues if the USG is going to avert potentially destabilizing internal developments in Ethiopia as we approach these critical elections. End Comment.

111. (U) A/S Kramer has edited and cleared this report.
YAMAMOTO